[**Land use concerns**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693576/land-use-concerns)

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THE past few weeks have seen several environmental catastrophes across the country. An unprecedented heatwave raged through Sindh and the adjoining areas, directly impacting the crop and fruit harvest, significantly reducing yields. The water crisis continues to generate tension between Sindh and Punjab as the authorities have to decide how to allocate the scarce resource for irrigation and other uses. Forest fires in the Margallas and parts of Balochistan and KP have reduced trees to ashes include chilghoza pines that were a source of livelihood for many in the country’s most impoverished province. As if this were not enough, protesters set trees to fire in Islamabad, which is hard to justify for any political cause.

Nature has bestowed on humanity invaluable ecological assets. Every intervention by man in the name of progress and development has tampered with them. Mining, clearing forests to increase farmland, using the hinterland to expand real estate, reclaiming land for development by altering the coastline, and similar interventions have had serious environmental repercussions that have shown the correlation between inappropriate development choices and natural disasters. Seven out of the 17 SDGs caution us about the irresponsible use of ecological assets and material resources. Scientific land use management is the need of the hour and several coordinated initiatives can help achieve this.

Land management is a provincial subject. The provincial boards of revenue are the custodian of land assets dealing with records of allotments and allocations, transactions and related functions. Substantial reforms have been introduced in Punjab, KP and Sindh over a period of time, and reportedly, basic maps and cadastral records are now digitised. Greater access to land information is possible in these three provinces now than it was a decade ago. However, the systems need further upgrades to include the rapid changes in land use in the form of urban development, disasters, land subdivisions, real estate demarcations, infrastructural allocations, etc. Publication of annual reports by the land management authorities would help in the dissemination of information to stakeholders including government agencies, businessmen, entrepreneurs, environmental agencies and the common people, and make land transactions transparent, thus helping to eradicate clandestine corrupt practices. The categorisation and use of land is the next important step. Land management agencies must map land assets to identify their existing uses and prepare a list of priority actions accordingly. Ecological assets to be conserved must be notified and communicated to the public.

For instance, Pakistan and AJK together have 35 national parks housing unique flora, fauna and ecosystems. Forests comprise an important land use category. Forest cover in the country is only 4.8 per cent of the land area, far below internationally recommended levels. Illegal tree felling, unauthorised construction near or within forest lands, unsupervised camping or habitation (a likely source of forest fires) and disposal of hazardous waste from adjoining settlements are real concerns. Comprehensive forest management plans are needed to protect the wooded areas.

Protecting nature is a national effort.

Tampering with nature has led to havoc. A massive glacial lake outburst flooding occurred in early May in Hunza which was temporarily disconnected from the adjoining areas. Amenity buildings were partially damaged and many residences had to be vacated. The Karakoram Highway often witnesses landslides, creating hazards for vehicles. Can strategic ecological conservation help? Restricting the felling of trees and building activity would be a good step.

A major initiative to protect forest land and the environment was initiated by the previous government. The federal climate change ministry launched the ambitious Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme that was to be undertaken over four years at a total cost of around Rs125bn. More than 80,000 daily wagers were engaged in this exercise. According to reports, 430 million trees were planted.

Unfortunately, the programme was interrupted by allegations of corruption, malpractice and embezzlement of funds. It is a pity that an appropriate initiative could not achieve its targets. Politics must be put aside; the protection of forests, terrains, aquifers, woodlands, wetlands and other forms of natural land formations is extremely important. A national register of ecological assets, identifying their legal status and their area, plus mapping their details and explaining the risk factors should be published by the concerned authorities periodically. This document must also include innovations at a local, regional and national level to protect such assets. With more information, a better response to safeguarding the environment is likely to emerge.

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